

Chapter 4

The Problem of *Zeitoper*:

The Fate of Contemporary Opera at the Kroll

The last chapter explained how Otto Klemperer's grandiose plans to run the Kroll Opera single-handedly came to an end as he proved himself manifestly unfit to do so. After the 1927-28 season Klemperer abandoned his administrative responsibilities, citing stress and poor health, and was responsible only for musical matters. Did the Kroll nevertheless become an avant-garde opera? Klemperer famously disliked this term. In an interview with Peter Heyworth he made the revealing statement that the Kroll was not avant-garde "in the sense that the term is used today".¹ This suggests that the idea is not fixed and that it has had many different historical manifestations. My aim is not to pin down one specific meaning that the term may have had in the 1920s, but merely to point to its flexibility and, above all, political ambiguity. Clearly, the Weimar era is the subject of so much emotional nostalgia primarily because of its openness to experimentation. This applied to opera as much as to other art forms. The number of opera premieres, not only in Berlin but also in provincial cities, was staggering by today's standards and allowed young composers and innovative musical ideas to gain a public forum. Some observers, such as the composer Ernst Krenek, to be discussed in this chapter, dismissed the premiere phenomenon as sensationalism and as a search for the latest trend. He claimed, for instance, that for a specific opera house to secure a premiere was everything, while mounting an opera that had made its debut in another city was far less interesting

¹ Peter Heyworth, *Conversations with Klemperer*. p. 68.

because the work in question was regarded as yesterday's news.² For many of the more popular and successful works of the 1920s, however, this simply does not hold true; for an opera to vanish without a trace after one run was virtually unheard of. A tour through most of the major German cities was much more common. In addition, Krenek was able to achieve a remarkable degree of success for a young composer in a Berlin which gave so much exposure to new music. He was not the only beneficiary. Radically new approaches to opera by Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill and others gained the greatest amount of attention in Berlin, though their first performances usually took place elsewhere. The Kroll Opera's sponsorship of contemporary opera took place within the context of unusually favorable circumstances for these new conceptions of the form. With these considerations in mind, I will go on to address the repertory at the Kroll after 1928 and its relationship to *Zeitoper*, the most prominent trend in German opera of the Weimar era.

Zeitoper has been the subject of a considerable amount of scholarly attention and is generally considered the archetype of Weimar opera.³ I will argue in this chapter that it was one ingredient among many in the 1920s, and that its most important role was an attempted revival of the representative German national tradition. Most accounts of *Zeitoper* focus on formal and musical innovations. For example, these operas were set in the present; they focused on socio-political issues; and they were often, though not always, satirical. Musically, the *Zeitoper* form incorporated

² Ernst Krenek, *Im Atem der Zeit: Erinnerungen an die Moderne*. Cologne 1998. These memoirs were originally written in English, but have been published only in a German translation by Friedrich Saathen. p. 364.

³ See Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor 1988) and Kevin Amidon, "Nirgends brennen wir genauer: Institution, Experiment and Crisis in the German *Zeitoper*, 1924-1931." (Unpublished dissertation, Princeton 2001.)

jazz and American popular music into the score. Ironically, however, one crucial fact about *Zeitoper* is usually underemphasized in historical accounts. All examples of the form were in German, and they were a conscious attempt to create a German form of opera distinct from previous traditions, especially the legacy of Wagner. It is this which makes *Zeitoper* as much a restorative project as a revolutionary one, and explains why the genre was relatively short-lived.

Most literature on the Kroll has correctly pointed out that it did not offer an unusual number of contemporary works and that the attention devoted to new opera was no greater than at most German opera houses of the period.⁴ Indeed, in Berlin itself the Kroll appeared almost conservative, given that it premiered only one new opera, Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage" in 1929. Contemporary opera occupied a small but important role in the Kroll repertory. Importantly, however, its role expanded after Ernst Legal took over as *Intendant*.

Appointed by Heinz Tietjen, Legal was a man of numerous talents. In addition to being an accomplished actor and director, he also had significant previous experience in opera management, though at houses with lower profiles than that of the Kroll. Ernst Legal, born in Schlieben (Niederlausitz) in 1881, had planned to become an actor at an early age; he later expanded his activities to become a director and, as of 1918, *Intendant* of the state theater in Wiesbaden, where he spent a total of eight years. Legal had worked at the Staatliche Schauspiele under Leopold

⁴ Including the first to chronicle the Kroll's history, Hans Curjel in *Experiment Krolloper* (Munich 1974). Detlef Meyer zu Heringdorf's dissertation on the Städtische Oper shows that the latter institution not only offered more contemporary works but that it was fairly typical of German opera houses in the mid-1920s. See Meyer zu Heringdorf, *Das Charlottenburger Opernhaus von 1912 bis 1961: von der privat-gesellschaftlichen geführten Bürgeroper bis zur subventionierten Berliner 'Städtischen Oper'* (Berlin 1988).

Jeßner from 1920 to 1924 but then left for two provincial posts; in Darmstadt, where he directed opera for the first time, and in Kassel, where he was the successor to Paul Bekker, previously the Ministry of Culture's first choice for the directorship of the State Opera.

Legal is rarely mentioned as an important figure in the development of the Kroll Opera. The fact that he has been written out of its history is largely the responsibility of dramaturge Hans Curjel, author of the first collection of documentation on the opera. Curjel's attitude emerges clearly in a letter he wrote to Christl Anft, author of a dissertation on Legal. "As far as Legal is concerned, he was essentially a marginal figure. As you rightly say, he was appointed as a rescuer in time of need. That is to say, he was supposed to neutralize and water down the general artistic program of the Kroll Opera, which was in crisis...That the operas directed by him turned out rather colorless is due to the fact that he was essentially a conventional and moderate opera director."⁵ The available evidence concerning the management of the opera in the Legal era and the reception of Legal's own artistic concepts suggests that this assessment is faulty. The productions for which he was responsible were among the most successful in the entire Kroll repertory; at the same time, he secured a solid financial base for the opera by building a regular audience and winning back some of those who had been discontented with the Kroll's first season. Rather than being conventional, Legal was quickly won over by the Kroll's ideas. His productions, while not perhaps as radical as the Klemperer/Dülberg "Fidelio" (see Chapter 3) were also not as deliberately provocative and were greater critical successes.

⁵ Curjel to Christl Anft, June 5, 1971; Nachlaß Hans Curjel, DLA Marbach.

Curjel was, however, correct when he stated that the reasons for Legal's hiring were hardly those of concern for the well-being of the Kroll. Tietjen, engaged in intrigue as usual, assumed he could make the Kroll "harmless" by doing so. The assumption was not entirely unreasonable, since Legal had spent his brief time in Kassel concerned with damage control. His task had been to win back an audience alienated by the uncompromising modernist and avant-garde program pursued by his predecessor Bekker.⁶ As a result, many critics judged his own efforts as too cautious and moderate. Legal himself was well aware that this reputation had preceded him, and that his role at the Kroll was to tame the institution, limiting all experimental efforts. At the same time, the radical forces in the Ministry of Culture such as Kestenberg regarded Legal as a mere alibi for Klemperer's continuing leadership.⁷ Importantly, he also had a reputation for being able to salvage financially troubled theaters, something that was most welcome both to Tietjen and the Ministry. The threat of the opera's closure was constantly before his eyes as early as 1928, as revealed by a diary entry: "Tietjen says that if I don't manage it, there will be liquidation."⁸ The following two chapters will argue that Legal managed far too well for Tietjen's taste. During his time as *Intendant* the opera outgrew its growing pains and was well on its way to becoming a viable alternative to the more traditional conception of opera offered by the State Opera and the City Opera. Contrary to the usual view of Klemperer as an arch-modernist, the last chapter demonstrated that his

⁶ Anft, *Ernst Legal*, p. 211.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 231.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 232. Legal's diaries are currently held by the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, along with the rest of his papers, but are unavailable to the public. After the publication of the Anft study, these papers were donated by Legal's daughter, Marga Legal-Klevenow, to the institute, on the condition that certain materials remain inaccessible.

main interest was in "rediscoveries", older but neglected operas which lacked appeal for most audiences. It was Legal who selected more new operas, generally those he had already encountered during his tenure at Kassel and Darmstadt. As so often, the provinces were ahead of Berlin, but the capital could give new works the most exposure.⁹

Which works were these, and what was their significance? It will come as no surprise that one composer who had relatively few dealings with the Kroll was Arnold Schönberg, whose influence in the period has been greatly exaggerated due to the significant prestige he and his students enjoyed after 1945. Much recent scholarship has pointed out that the Schönberg school is not representative of the Weimar musical scene as a whole. Michael Walter, among others, points to the massive influence of Theodor W. Adorno in creating the impression that Schönberg's music is synonymous with the 1920s avant-garde.¹⁰ Walter is wrong to imply that Adorno's scholarship created the impression that Schönberg's music was popular and well-liked. Quite the contrary, the claim he made concerned moral authority, not popularity. However, he is right to point out that continued focus on only one aspect of the avant-garde has worked to obscure other musical avant-gardes who could make a more convincing claim for their appeal to the public. The story of Schönberg's sole contact with the Kroll shows exactly how little he had in common with those in charge at the opera. According to his correspondence with Legal, Schönberg had considered offering his "Von heute auf morgen" (1930) to the Kroll. This would have been an intriguing premiere as the work is

⁹ The City Opera, for example, featured more contemporary works than the Kroll. According to Detlef Meyer zu Heringdorf, the City Opera's profile was typical of German opera houses in the mid-1920s. See *Das Charlottenburger Opernhaus*.

¹⁰ Michael Walter, "Oper im Dritten Reich" in Udo Bermbach, ed., *Oper im 20. Jahrhundert: Entwicklungstendenzen und Komponisten*. Stuttgart 2000.

Schönberg's own contribution to the genre of *Zeitoper*, though musically and ideologically its premises are quite different; both autonomous art and traditional morality are ultimately reinstated. In fact the premiere took place in Frankfurt and Schönberg retained the impression that he had been unjustly ignored by the Kroll.¹¹ In his own words, "I do not wish to claim that I ever felt bound to you in any way. Seeing that in two years you were not in the position to produce any of my works, not even the oftne announced "Erwartung", I naturally doubted that you would produce this much more difficult work."¹²

This is a rather odd description of "Von heute auf morgen", which is hardly considered one of Schönberg's most important works and has mainly historical importance as evidence of his thoughts on contemporary musical trends.¹³ However, the much earlier "Erwartung" (1909, premiered 1924) did in fact appear at the Kroll in June 1930, together with "Die glückliche Hand" (date of composition? premiered 1924). Both works are referred to as "monodramas" and most scholars do not consider them to be operas in any meaningful sense.¹⁴ Producing an entire Schönberg evening was risky both in view of the inaccessibility of the music and in view of the fact that both works together comprise only forty minutes of music; thus, they were not considered by many in the audience to make up a full evening. Presented with the production by Arthur Maria

¹¹ "Von heute auf morgen" did not appear in Berlin until 1999, on a double bill with the world premiere of Elliott Carter's "What's Next?".

¹² Nachlaß Ernst Legal, Akademie der Künste Berlin; Schönberg to Legal, June 2, 1929.

¹³ For more discussion, see Rachel Nussbaum, "'True Art' and 'Skilful Entertainment': Schönberg, Opera and Mass Culture" (unpublished paper, presented at the American Society for Aesthetics, November 1998).

¹⁴ Jürgen Schlader, "Zum Scheitern verurteilt: Musiktheater-Avantgarde in Deutschland und Arnold Schönberg's 'Glückliche Hand'" in Franz-Norbert Mennemeier and Erika Fischer-Lichte, eds., *Drama und Theater der europäischen Avantgarde* (Tübingen/Basel 1994).

Rabenalt, the composer strenuously objected and insisted that significant changes be made. Alexander von Zemlinsky, who had conducted the "Erwartung" premiere in Prague, also conducted the Schönberg evening at the Kroll. His actions in taking the cast through an all-night rehearsal emerge in some accounts as heroic but might better be seen as an indication of the inability of Schönberg to work with others, especially with an ensemble like that of the Kroll which embodied artistic concepts of its own. The "radical fulfillment of Expressionist theatrical ideals" in "Die glückliche Hand" recognized by H.H. Stuckenschmidt, took place against the background of sets by Oskar Schlemmer which Schönberg himself considered incompatible with his artistic vision.¹⁵ Schönberg tended to have extremely detailed ideas about how he wanted his works performed and had previously described these to Legal. However, since the opera did not hire him as a set designer, it had no responsibility to realize these ideas and the steps it took to resolve the conflict can only be viewed as extraordinarily generous.¹⁶

¹⁵ *B.Z. am Mittag*, June 30, 1930

¹⁶ Contrary to the argument made by Evan Baker in an article entitled "Arnold Schönberg als Regisseur?: 'Erwartung' und 'Die glückliche Hand' an der Krolloper" (*Journal of the Arnold Schönberg Center*, March 2001, pp. 347-357) the Kroll was not the center of "the radical tactic" in staging "in which the *Regisseur* and *Bühnenbildner* may create a production completely contrary to the composer's wishes." Baker contrasts this with "the *Inszenierung* which may actually follow what the composer and librettist had intended." On the basis of these overly simplistic characterizations of opera production, the article goes on to imply that any production of a Schönberg work which does not follow the composer's written instructions to the letter is per se illegitimate. Because Baker believes that "had Schönberg taken matters into his own hands and staged the operas himself, he would have proved to be a first-rate stage director", he rejects the whole activity of a critical re-reading of opera and also defends Schönberg's churlish behavior during the preparations for the 1930 production. His descriptions of the Kroll itself range from vague: "...the production styles of the Krolloper were intended to be completely different from any other theater" to grossly inaccurate: "Any references to naturalism or realistic settings were avoided."

The Relationship of *Zeitoper* to the Kroll Idea

Contemporary opera at the Kroll was better represented by examples of the *Zeitoper* form. The ideals of *Zeitoper* seem to be highly compatible with those of the Kroll. To make high art functional and relate it to contemporary concerns looks at first like a promising approach which would also justify the existence of institutions like the Kroll which presented opera not as a meaningless luxury but as living theater. Some of the limitations of *Zeitoper* are, however, also clear from the story of its reception at the Kroll. Importantly, its claim to be functional does not necessarily include any kind of pedagogical project, and indeed assumes considerable familiarity with the operatic canon in order to be understood. The gradual decline of *Zeitoper* does not, however, confirm the theory of an opera crisis. As I will show, the proponents of the form ultimately turned away from it and took their efforts in new directions. Because of 1933, these developments are unclear to us today, and *Zeitoper* has been depicted as the archetypal form of the Weimar era, the last effort to revive an art form that would inevitably lose out to sports, film and other forms of popular culture.

The career of Kurt Weill, for instance, has often been regarded as that of a composer who "sold out" and became a mere entertainer in American exile, rather than continuing the approach to music theater he

had already established in Germany.¹⁷ No major work of Weill's was performed at the Kroll; Klemperer famously rejected the premiere of "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" (1930) claiming that the work was obscene. He also preferred the small-scale version of the work first performed in 1927. Weill was at this time developing his own ideas of a fusion of high art and popular culture directly related to the *Zeitoper* project. The notion of the "two Weills", the authentic composer and the sell-out, has long been popular but has recently been challenged, for example by Heinz Geuen. In his view, Weill's American works were the natural continuation of his early experimentation in Germany.¹⁸ Indeed, opera has always contained elements of popular culture and operatic "hit songs" emerged early, especially in Italy. This situation is what made so many people on the avant-garde suspicious of opera. Bertolt Brecht's famous accusation of "culinary opera" reflects the widespread view, also held by critics such as Heinrich Strobel, that opera inevitably degenerated into sentimentality and banality. Weill, on the other hand, did not view this as a terrible danger. He supported the development of a democratic *Volkskultur* which would not exclude emotion.¹⁹ The school opera "Der Jasager" (1930) is, however, not very typical of his work. This short opera was performed by a group of Berlin students in cooperation with the Kroll ensemble. Though little discussed in the press, it constitutes the only attempt made to reach the younger generation. More directly relevant are the works of Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek, which this chapter will discuss as examples of the *Zeitoper* form which ultimately reveal its

¹⁷ For Weill's own writings on *Zeitoper*, see *Musik und Theater: Gesammelte Schriften* (Edited by Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, Berlin 1990).

¹⁸ Heinz Geuen, *Von der Zeitoper zur Broadway Opera: Kurt Weill und die Idee des musikalischen Theaters*. Schliengen 1997.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 114-15,

limitations. Hindemith's "Cardillac" (1928) had been a nationwide success before it reached the Kroll after a rather lengthy tour through ten cities.²⁰ As noted above, "Neues vom Tage" was the only Kroll world premiere, appearing in the context of the Berlin Festival of 1929. The operas of Ernst Krenek also played a significant role in the Kroll repertory. However, the composer's best-known work, "Jonny spielt auf" (1927), probably the most successful new opera of the decade, appeared not at the Kroll but at the City Opera, which was far more active in that search for the latest operatic hit so disliked by Krenek. Indeed, the fact that he is remembered primarily as the composer of "Jonny" is ironic in the extreme, as this chapter will explain. His greatest popular success is not representative of his work as a whole. The three one-act operas of 1928, "Der Diktator", "Schwergewicht, oder die Ehre der Nation" and "Das geheime Königreich" continued the composer's exploration of *Zeitoper*, but it was not long before he found this too limited a form and called for a return to "*große Oper*". The result was "Leben des Orest" (1930) a modern version of the often-treated story of Orestes. Hindemith similarly turned away from the *Zeitoper* project, an example of a process that has been described by Hermann Danuser as a turn towards "*Bekennnisoper*", opera which explores deeper political and aesthetic themes than *Zeitoper* had ever aimed to do.²¹ While introducing new elements into opera, such as jazz and popular music, and helping to break down the Wagnerian mystique which had surrounded German opera, much of *Zeitoper* failed to develop into a new form which would combine attempts to make opera

²⁰ An article in *Das Orchester* 5/14, July 1928, noted with astonishment that "Cardillac" received its Berlin premiere after making a "short detour" through Dresden, Darmstadt, Vienna, Mannheim, Hanover, Barmen, Elberfeld, Wiesbaden, Oldenburg and Gotha.

²¹ Hermann Danuser, *Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts* Laaber 1984.

more accessible with attempts to deal with specifically modern issues and problems. Frequently it misses what makes opera appealing; passion, emotion and the ability to make audiences identify with the action. My discussion of "Neues vom Tage" will show why these shortcomings led to the decline of *Zeitoper* and, at the same time, why the culture of opera in the Weimar Republic did *not* in general decline.

Pseudo-Populism in Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage"

The premiere of "Neues vom Tage" took place on June 8, 1929. It is one of Hindemith's least-studied works and is striking for the way it combines a complex score with a libretto by Marcellus Schiffer, better known for his work in the Berlin cabaret scene. The major contemporary issues addressed in the opera are two: the role of mass media in shaping the lives of individuals; and divorce, including its impact on women's sexual freedom. This first theme is more pertinent to a discussion of the relationship between *Zeitoper* and the rest of Weimar culture; mass culture and the mass dissemination of music through the new technology of radio were viewed as inevitably undermining the significance of opera. As I suggested in the last chapter, this issue is more complicated than many accounts of Weimar culture would have it. "Neues vom Tage" shares the deep ambivalence about high culture and *Bildung* displayed by the *Zeitoper* form as a whole. This meant that the form could not serve as the basis for a transformation of opera, but became a phenomenon that merely cancelled itself out. *Zeitoper* proclaimed that the notions of

Bildung characteristic of the prewar era were completely hollow and could only serve as objects of parody. This, however, was not obvious to the general public. Most examples of *Zeitoper*, however, did not suggest any future for high culture and thus failed to answer the question of what the future of opera might be.

The disparity between the music and the libretto of "Neues vom Tage" was noted by critics at the time and has continued to puzzle them ever since. As shown by Susan C. Cook's discussion of the work, the mixture of genres evident in "Neues vom Tage" has even raised doubts about the seriousness of Hindemith's intentions in setting Schiffer's libretto.²² An examination of the relationship between music and text must also be related to Hindemith's position in Weimar musical life in general.²³ "Neues vom Tage" has never been discussed within the framework of Hindemith's ideas about music and *Gemeinschaft*, nor have its possible connections to the Kroll idea been explored.

However, it is those aspects of the opera dealing with sexuality which caused a scandal at its premiere and established it, along with the 1929 production of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman", as one of the Kroll's most controversial offerings. Hindemith's works, claims Michael Walter, were forbidden during the Third Reich primarily due to the fallout from "Neues vom Tage"; Hitler was personally enraged by the infamous scene in which the heroine Laura is depicted "naked" in the bathtub of the Hotel Savoy singing the praises of the Berlin utility companies which provide her with warm water. (In fact, soprano Grete Stückgold wore a

²² Cook, *Opera for a New Republic*, p. 161.

²³ See Jürgen Mainka, "Hindemith und die Weimarer Republik" in *Hindemith-Jahrbuch* XVIII, 1988.

flesh-colored body stocking.)²⁴ There is, however, no evidence that Hitler ever saw the production. Walter's allegation that it is likely he did so because politically prominent people often attended the Kroll and "it would be improbable if Hitler did not also occasionally, or at least once, attend the Kroll Opera" is insupportable.²⁵ The evidence is against his having visited an opera already notorious as a temple of "cultural Bolshevism." The bathtub scene was widely reported in the press and knowledge of it did not require actual familiarity with the opera.

Laura ends up in the bathtub in the course of a series of attempts to "compromise" herself so that she and her husband Eduard can get divorced. This process is no simple matter, but requires considerable trickery and theatrics. Many of these are ingredients of traditional opera plots, but, as the critic of the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* pointed out, generally they are employed for the opposite purpose; to bring two lovers together rather than to separate them.²⁶ Many musical conventions of opera are used to make this effect clear; both dramatically and musically, "Neues vom Tage" intends to mock these conventions and thus expose them as hollow. The goal is to turn traditional opera on its head, and thus also the expectations of an audience used to treating opera as an accessory to its own embrace of social respectability and empty conventions.

The divorce requires the services of an "office for family affairs" represented by "the beautiful Herr Hermann" serenaded by his secretaries to the accompaniment of a chorus of typewriters. Hermann had previously been responsible for arranging the breakup of another couple, Herr and Frau M., but unfortunately forgot that he had only been "rented" for the

²⁴ See Walter, *Hitler in der Oper*, p. 193.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 193, footnote 81.

²⁶ *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, June 10, 1929.

job and fell in love with Frau M. The pattern seems to be repeating itself as Hermann meets with Laura in various public places, first in a museum, then in her hotel. Laura and Eduard's divorce becomes a public scandal and an item in all the newspapers, but the couple finds they can get along better than they had believed; they decide to stay together. However, this is not acceptable, as a chorus explains at the end of the opera. Eduard and Laura are no longer real people, but media constructs. They may not decide on their own fate.

This potentially fascinating idea, familiar to us now from such phenomena as reality television, is undermined by the opera's ambivalence about the bourgeois ideals it claims to reject. Is it simply a modern spin on themes which have always been used in opera? "Neues vom Tage" has been compared to Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro", but this is an inappropriate comparison as Hindemith's work is a creation only of its time and place and only critiques traditional opera without transcending it. As a musical experiment, it aimed to mix jazz elements with much older forms. This is made clear by a revealing investigation into the origins of the Kroll production written by Lotte Eisner, otherwise known as a film critic. Eisner attended a rehearsal and spoke to Hindemith about his musical goals. These included "getting away from operatic theatricality, naturally. The singers should simply sing as if they are in a concert."²⁷ Eisner interpreted this to mean a return to forms such as the fugue. In her words, "In the effort to go back to the original form of opera, a bridge is built from the news of the day to the old."²⁸

²⁷ *Vossische Zeitung*, undated.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In fact, the opera does not work on this level because it relies so heavily on nineteenth-century models, if only as objects of mockery. The meeting between Herr Hermann and Laura in the museum, and their subsequent love duet, becomes too much for Eduard, who ends up hurling a statue of Venus at his "rival." The point is that the stereotypical emotions presented in this scene are just as false in context of an opera in which the characters actually intend passion and jealousy as they are here, in which the context is merely a set-up. The choice of a museum as the location for a rendezvous is significant; this is a temple of culture which is clearly not taken seriously by anyone who visits it. As Laura arrives and reflects on her prospective meeting with Herr Hermann, the façade of love is accompanied by the façade of culture; a bored tour guide appears with a group of people and introduces a statue of "the famous Venus" - "really classic, three stars in Baedeker." The crowd responds with predictable staged rapture; "How classic! How famous!" Laura is thus inspired to compare her own situation to that of the ancient Greek gods. She is a character in her own personal drama, which is only reinforced by the appearance of Herr Hermann. Their love duet, full of "Tristan" quotations, is interrupted several times by Hermann remarking that all of his overblown rhetoric about love is "included in the price". Eduard's subsequent destruction of the Venus statue is thus meaningless since the statue is irrelevant except as an object of commodification.

The listener might well ask what the point of the parody is intended to be. The liner notes for a 1991 recording of "Neues vom Tage" praise the work for its freshness and irreverence, as shown by scenes such as the one described above. The author's generalizations about the Weimar opera audience fit rather uncomfortably with his account of the work's

reception: "People could no longer tolerate the pathos so beloved in Kaiser Wilhelm's days and were tired of the babble about German culture, since what that had led to was evident around them every day."²⁹ The popular idea that the First World War discredited "German culture" per se is cancelled out by the admission that "Neues vom Tage" was intended to provoke its audience. At the premiere it certainly did so; over 100 letters of complaint from Volksbühne members landed on Siegfried Nestriepke's desk.³⁰

This reaction does not, however, make "Neues vom Tage" into a daring or provocative work. Its treatment of operatic traditions allegedly appalled "the humorless militarists in the audience", yet it is doubtful that very many humorless militarists attended the premiere. The critique of high culture in this opera in fact seems rather tired and adolescent, especially by the standards of 1929. Contrary to the idea that only the horrors of the war revealed the artificiality of Wilhelmine concepts of culture and *Bildung*, in fact these had long been recognized, not least by the Nietzschean critique of the *Bildungsphilister*.³¹ The notion that high culture had become a commodity was far from fresh and subversive by this time; the infamous bathtub scene represents simply another attempt to shock the sensibilities of contemporaries.

Many of these failings can be attributed to the libretto, which did not find favor among most contemporary critics. Yet it is backed up by Hindemith's music, as explained above. Any appreciation of the opera's

²⁹ Notes written by Bernhard Feuchter for a 1991 Wergo recording conducted by Jan Latham-König. (WER 6192-2).

³⁰ Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*. Cambridge 1983. pp. 289-290.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge 1983, pp. 9-10

significance required a familiarity with the operatic canon, making "Neues vom Tage" elite culture for those who rejected the notion of a cultural elite. *Zeitoper* distanced itself from previous models, but also failed to contribute anything new; it thus cannot be seen as part of the pedagogical tradition of *Gebrauchsmusik* in which Hindemith played so important a role. The form was indeed in decline from 1929 onwards and was not really a victim of Nazi cultural policy. For this reason, its political significance as archetypal Weimar opera is extremely questionable. Though this opera was the target of right-wing attacks, this alone does not make it a "progressive" or left-wing work. In the case of the Schönberg school, recent scholarship has emphasized this point, which may equally well be applied to other sectors of the avant-garde.

"Neues vom Tage" is a typical *Zeitoper* because it is just that - topicality for topicality's sake. The opera embodies pure cynicism without anything constructive to take its place. Its media critique in particular reveals just how indebted the opera remains to the notions of high art and *Bildung* it ostensibly attacks. The gap between score and libretto is not as great as some critics have alleged. The Schiffer libretto at first seems to resemble that composed by Arnold Schönberg's wife Gertrud, using the pseudonym of Max Blonda, for 1930's "Von heute auf morgen."³² This latter work, while in some sense a *Zeitoper*, is also an explicit critique of the form. "Modernity", as exemplified by mass culture and licentious sexual behavior, is only a superficial distraction from the enduring artistic values Schönberg believed were present in his own music. This pseudo-modernity, represented by *Zeitoper*, would not survive because it rested solely on the fleeting enthusiasm of a public who might just as well be

³² See Nussbaum "'True Art' and 'Skilful Entertainment'".

attending films or sporting events. According to Schönberg, it was not an answer to the complex situation faced by Weimar opera as described in the previous chapter.

Schiffer's libretto, by contrast, seems less banal on the surface. It contains what looks like a trenchant critique of modern media culture. Eduard and Laura, deprived of any choice in their own fate, are archetypal creatures of the media, people who have lost their individuality. However, if the notion of the bourgeois individual were truly as compromised as the opera implies, loss of individuality would be no tragedy. This point is underscored by the music; if the pathos of nineteenth-century opera had completely lost its relevance in Weimar culture, it could not be worth attacking. A true *Gebrauchsmusik*, while intended to be a music suited to the conditions of modern life, cannot entirely reject pathos because the point of it is to bridge the gap between elite and popular culture. Indeed, the category, as demonstrated by Stephen Hinton, has deep philosophical roots; its use in the 1920s can thus be viewed as an attempt to fit the moral and ethical standards of a contemporary public.³³

Contrary to the liner notes cited above, the story of the Kroll Opera shows a cultural optimism overlooked in many accounts of Weimar culture. This study argues that most members of the Weimar-era public did not believe that German culture was bankrupt or forever discredited by militarism. Rather, the experience of military defeat had shown the necessity of creating a different, more democratic and more accessible cultural life. The outcry generated by "Neues vom Tage" does not demonstrate the cultural philistinism of the public. The opera faced

³³ Stephen Hinton, *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik: A Study of Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) with Particular Reference to the Works of Paul Hindemith* (New York/London 1989).

opposition because it is cynical and ultimately degenerates into snobbery. While depicting loss of individual subjectivity as inevitable in the modern world, composer and librettist imply that the "normal" bourgeois people they depict never had a real subjectivity in the first place. While the opera satirizes the commodification of high culture, it never proposes an alternative. This ambivalence about high culture is characteristic of *Zeitoper*, and explains why the phenomenon was so short-lived. The strongest justification for creating a new *type* of opera was to engage opera in a project of cultural renewal which would lead to a new *Gemeinschaft*. Just as opera had served as the center of community in past centuries, it could now be reinvented to serve the needs of a vastly changed public and forge this new and amorphous audience into a new community.

Ernst Krenek and the Kroll Opera, 1928-1930

Another contemporary composer voiced these concerns publicly and was active in journalism which addressed the relationship between music and society. Ernst Krenek fundamentally reconsidered his relationship to *Zeitoper*. As stated above, Krenek's status as the archetypal Weimar composer is at best extremely problematic. "Jonny spielt auf" outraged cultural conservatives by its portrait of a black American jazz musician who is presented as the wave of the future and contrasted with the isolated and over-intellectual European composer Max. Max is so remote from the outside world that he lives on a glacier. Eventually, however, he realizes the importance of integrating himself into everyday life in order to compose music of lasting value. Yet Krenek disavowed this extremely successful opera shortly afterwards, disillusioned by the

media attention he received, which he felt had little to do with the substance of the work. The experiment of writing a score influenced by jazz, or what passed for jazz in central Europe in 1927, seemed cheap and distasteful to Krenek at a later point in his career. He felt profoundly alienated from the culture of 1920s Berlin, although the Berlin musical scene proved receptive to his compositions. Indeed, his memoirs, written in American exile, provide ample evidence of his distaste for Weimar-era Berlin, which he found ugly, crass and focused only on the latest artistic sensation.³⁴ After "Jonny" had become precisely such a sensation, Krenek gradually turned to a rehabilitation of the large-scale opera (*große Oper*) and wrote regularly about music for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

Krenek's operas were a noticeable presence at the Kroll, though none had its premiere there. His three one-act operas of 1928, "Der Diktator", "Schwergewicht, oder die Ehre der Nation" and "Das geheime Königreich", were the first to appear, all performed on a single evening. These works were still in the *Zeitoper* mode, but are based on distinct varieties of opera. "Der Diktator" tells the story of the title character, usually identified as a portrait of Mussolini, and his love for Maria, the wife of an officer injured by gas warfare in a war planned by the dictator. While Maria plans revenge on the dictator, her plans go tragically wrong, as she is shot by his jealous wife and her dead body is discovered at the end of the opera by her blind husband. This work in the style of Italian *verismo*, but still containing jazz influences, was accompanied by "Schwergewicht", the comic story of a boxer who is said to represent the "honor" of Germany. This was allegedly inspired by a statement by the German ambassador to the United States to the effect that athletes had

³⁴ Krenek, *Im Atem der Zeit*, pp. 247 ff.

done far more for the nation than artists or intellectuals ever could. Fittingly, the boxer is trapped on his training machine at the end, forced to repeat his role as a mechanical product for the foreseeable future. The fairy-tale opera "Das geheime Königreich" focused on the ruler of a fictional kingdom who has lost his crown, a rather transparent metaphor not only for political power but for subjectivity itself.

As "short operas" the one-acters were something of a trend at the time. Such critics as H.H. Stuckenschmidt proclaimed them to be the wave of the future and declared that the "eternity" (*Unendlichkeit*) characteristic of the works of Wagner to be a bourgeois concept.³⁵ Stuckenschmidt deliberately used the English phrase "short operas" in his advocacy of the form to signify an embrace of "Americanization" which is, like the attitudes to *Bildung* I have described above, profoundly ambiguous. A fascination with all things American certainly inspired Krenek, especially in "Schwergewicht", but his employment of the "American" clichés so often found in *Zeitoper* (modern technology, jazz, the cult of celebrity and the increasingly fast pace of life) is not merely a neutral comment on contemporary trends as Susan Cook suggests. Rather, the perception that higher and more important values have been lost in the rush to modernity seems inescapable. Krenek's claim that he was never fully committed to *Zeitoper* as a form was written after the fact, but is plausible because the form was itself a phase of experimentation for most of its practitioners. The one-act evening was itself an experiment; despite its disjointed nature it was a success at its premiere and later on at the Kroll. Critics praised Krenek's dramatic talents, though many were

³⁵ Cited in Wolfgang Rogge, *Ernst Kreneks Opern im Spiegel der zwanziger Jahre*. Wolfenbüttel 1970.

dissatisfied with one or more of the short operas. "Das geheime Königreich", the work which makes the least explicit reference to a contemporary context, was generally judged the most effective. Its companion pieces were not as convincing, due to their perceived cheapness and overly obvious effects. The *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* concluded that the three one-acters were musical pastiche pointing to a fatal lack of original compositional ideas.³⁶ Indeed, they are simply an overview of possible approaches to the renewal of opera, and represent a transitional phase in the composer's development. Only one critic suggested that some contemporary themes were still too raw to be addressed on the opera stage. "Der Diktator", wrote V.Z of *Tempo*, was shocking because of its casual attitude towards chemical warfare: "...an event of indescribable horror such as the world war is already, after only ten years, coldly transformed into literature and theatrically coarsened."³⁷

"Leben des Orest", which premiered in Leipzig in 1930. was a very different phenomenon. A treatment of the familiar story of Orestes, the opera follows its protagonist to a "kingdom of the North" where he realizes that he must return home in order to have some hope of peace and reconciliation. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* commented that the work represented a new stage in Krenek's musical development. It was "ambitiously thought out in its ideas and choice of dramatic means and the forms of their realization - Attic in a musical sense and dramatically up to date, no matter in what guise..."³⁸ Krenek's goal was apparently to combine different operatic styles in one work rather than in several. Though this was a more sustained attempt to find a solution to the

³⁶ *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, December 3, 1928.

³⁷ *Tempo*, December 3, 1928.

³⁸ Quoted in Claudia Maurer-Zenck, *Der hoffnungslose Radikalismus der Mitte*: p. 27.

problem of contemporary opera, this reviewer thought "Leben des Orest" was not only too long, it was also too obvious an attempt to please the public.³⁹ Krenek was repeatedly criticized for this tendency by critics of various persuasions; the political right took the criticism a step further by demonizing him as a hack without talent who merely exploited the latest trends. The Leipzig premiere, though it received mixed reviews, was nonetheless judged superior to the version first produced at the Kroll in March 1930 directed by Ernst Legal, with sets by Giorgio de Chirico. The parodic aspect of the sets made the stylistic gaps in the work more obvious. Did Krenek want to make a serious statement about the relevance of the ancient world to modern conditions, or did he merely want to satirize it? This was unclear to the critics, who were understandably puzzled and irritated by the opera's ponderous symbolism, directly attributable to Krenek himself, who wrote libretti for all of his works. Certainly the choruses of the *Volk* in Act I, complaining of Agamemnon's tyranny and then enthusiastically embracing violence are an all too obvious reference to contemporary hedonism which recalls the Golden Calf scene in Schönberg's "Moses und Aron": "Now we are dancing the dance, and it is the dance of death, and death, he is among us, and he roars and seeks his victims..."⁴⁰ Orestes's escape to the northern kingdom ruled by King Thoas is likewise easy to read as an attempt by the artist to transcend the inadequacy of daily life and search for higher ideals, a search which is noble but results in detachment from other human beings. This has precedents in Krenek's work, notably Max's glacier in "Jonny spielt auf" which he must finally leave behind in order to create a

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Ernst Krenek, *Leben des Orest: große Oper in fünf Akten*. Vienna 1929.

meaningful art which will at the same time be more profound than Jonny's.

The inconsistency of the project is, however, matched by the inconsistency of the music. On the one hand, Krenek used the term "große Oper" without embarrassment and did not reject Wagner and Verdi as models; on the other hand, the score is still jazz-influenced, lending some substance to the charge that his works were excessively trendy. Oscar Bie, writing in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, took a somewhat different stance. To Americanize the ancient world, to "jazz it up" [*verjazzen*] was not in itself illegitimate. However, Krenek showed himself unwilling to expose every element of the story to satirical treatment. "He could have turned everything on its head. But the romantic in him cannot be killed, as is the case with every German musician, and it outshines all elements of jazz when its voice is heard..."⁴¹

This comment was perceptive; Krenek indeed remained a romantic, as his own writings about music show. However, he remained one in a more differentiated way than this critique implies. Rather than reject the nineteenth-century operatic tradition entirely, especially the Wagnerian tradition, Krenek aimed to select the best aspects of this tradition and apply them to his own work. His goals in "Leben des Orest", which used the ancient world in order to relate it to modern ideas, resembled those of Wagner in the "Ring". In his own words, "Where Wagner created living theater, it is just as operatic as that of Mozart or Verdi contains ideas. Thus, I allowed myself to attempt *große Oper* in addition to modern ideas."⁴²

⁴¹ *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, March 5, 1930.

⁴² Quoted in Maurer-Zenck, p. 41.

Zeitoper had been set in the contemporary world but often dealt with topics such as love, jealousy and the role of the artist. In explicitly parodistic musical form, these ideas could appeal to an audience familiar with the operatic tradition, or they could miss the point entirely, becoming inherent contradictions as they strove to reconcile the ideal of autonomous art with mass culture and mass communication. Krenek's decision to use the setting of the ancient world is a step away from this project. As an extremely common "universal" mythic point of reference, this context was a convenient vehicle for statements about modern culture. On the other hand, Krenek was not simply using mythological elements in the interest of straightforward satire, something which confused contemporary critics. In composing an opera of ideas, Krenek was already moving closer to the Schönberg circle, but he did not describe his own work as representing only timeless artistic concerns with no relation to the contemporary context. Indeed, in 1932 Krenek was to write that his own role in "the fate of opera" had received much less publicity than inferior efforts such as "Neues vom Tage": "Even the hopeless idiocy of a Marcellus Schiffer is analyzed as if it were a revolution in opera ideology."⁴³ The Schönberg circle, he argued, was at least better informed musically.

In this chapter I have argued that the essentially transitory and experimental nature of *Zeitoper* did not mean a crisis for the form as a whole. The question is: what next? What happened to the experimental impulses of composers in the following years, and how are they connected with the new function of music in an age skeptical of bourgeois subjectivity? Many potential developments in opera simply cannot be traced because of 1933. Contrary to much recent scholarship which aims

⁴³ Letter to Friedrich Gübler, June 24, 1932; quoted in Maurer-Zenck, p. 228.

to show the continuity of Weimar and Nazi culture, I believe that there was a profoundly disruptive break, above all in the realm of cultural policy. The decline of *Zeitoper* was not the result of political repression, but the project of expanding opera's range certainly was. The irony is that the Kroll, the major symbol of the "people's opera" and of republican culture, was not wholeheartedly committed to the project of the Ministry of Culture. The circumstances which forced it to close will be discussed in Chapter 6, in which I argue that they did not represent an ominous prelude to the Nazi future but were instead dictated by economic circumstances. The state's actions in 1923 laid the foundation for the difficulties in 1931 as all parties to the original Kroll contract found themselves in an untenable situation. The opera was not a martyr to the extreme right, despite what its partisans have argued for many years. In fact, as I will explain in Chapter 5, in terms of production style the Kroll's reputation as the most radical of German opera houses is exaggerated, and the outrage its productions caused has been overstated. A few unusually controversial cases have distracted attention from the way in which, under Legal, the opera actually began to fulfill its mission both aesthetically and in terms of the public.